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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2544, TFLE01: CHRISTIAN POLITICAL LEADERS SAY SHEBA'A

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2544	2006-08-07 06:58	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Beirut

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 002544

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/05/2016

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SUBJECT: TFLE01: CHRISTIAN POLITICAL LEADERS SAY SHEBA'A
IS KEY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

11. (C/NF) On August 5, A/S Welch and Ambassador Feltman met with Christian leaders from the anti-Syria March 14 movement, including former President Amin Gemayel, his son and Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel, Dory Chamoun, Carlos Edde, Fares Souaid, George Adwan, and presidential hopefuls Nayla Moawad (Minister of Social Affairs), Nassib Lahoud, and MP Boutros Harb. While claiming to be fully supportive of Prime Minister Siniora's call for a ceasefire, they are troubled that the current conflict might leave Hizballah in a stronger position within Lebanon than at the beginning. The Lebanese government will need to be in a position of strength to deal with Hizballah once the conflict is over, the leaders argued. To this end, they would support a continuation of the Israeli bombing campaign for a week or two if this were to diminish seriously Hizballah's strength on the ground. They also believe that a diplomatic agreement whereby Israel would hand over the Sheba'a Farms to the United Nations for final disposition would greatly enhance the GOL's stature while removing a major *raison d'etre* for an armed Hizballah. The attendees were not sanguine about the LAF's ability to deploy to the South without heavy international support and supervision (they expressed the usual Lebanese phobia that international support will desert them at the critical moment). Finally, the group stressed humanitarian issues, including gasoline provisions, returning IDPs to their villages in the South, and ultimately support for the rebuilding of the South. End Summary.

"We need to be empowered"

12. (C/NF) The meeting attendees stressed their support for PM Siniora and his Seven Point plan (issued during the Rome Conference) for stabilizing the situation in southern Lebanon. Though they approve of a ceasefire at some point, they do not insist that it be immediate (unlike the Siniora plan) and are more concerned about controlling the "finality of the process." They fear a ceasefire coming too early, with an admittedly weak central Lebanese government then forced prematurely to deal with a resurgent Hizballah. Claiming to reflect PM Siniora's private thoughts, several of the assembled leaders urged that Hizballah be given a "real pounding" by the Israelis to the point that the group would be "soft enough to listen to reason." According to Boutros Harb, "if we are convinced that Israel can finish the job, then we can allow a few more weeks," though the consensus seemed to rest between seven to ten days. If on the other hand Hizballah were to emerge emboldened with a perceived sense of victory, "that would be a disaster."

13. (C) Even with a militarily weakened Hizballah, the assembled group is not convinced that the Siniora government and the LAF would be strong enough to deal with Hizballah without significant outside support. "We need to be empowered," pleaded Nassib Lahoud. "How much empowerment can you give us?" They do not agree that Israel should first withdraw only to be replaced by the LAF, which they claim is still honeycombed with pro-Syrian officers, but that this should be done in conjunction with an international force. The group also supported extending the UN area of operations (whether under UNIFIL or a new international force) to the Lebanese-Syrian border in order to monitor the border points and block the resupply of Hizballah.

14. (C) On the Sheba'a Farms issue, the group urged that Israel be prevailed upon to hand over the territory to the United Nations to delineate the border (as it did once before in 2000). This would not be seen as a feather in Hizballah's cap. On the contrary, it is exactly what the

Hizballah-Syria-Iran axis does not want as it takes away their major pretext for continuing a low intensity conflict along the Blue Line in the future. "It would undress Hizballah." On the other hand, leaving out the issue of whether the UN may or may not ultimately determine that the Sheba'a Farms are Lebanese, such a handover by the Israelis would reflect positively on the GOL, with Siniora taking the credit for a diplomatic coup.

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15. (C) Following stabilization of the situation in the South, the group urged that the international community step in to support the rebuilding of destroyed villages and infrastructure, and that "the major purveyor of the funds should not be Iran." They also hope that the mostly-Shia IDP's be returned to their villages in southern Lebanon as soon as possible. This is more than a humanitarian impulse; they are fearful that a diaspora of southern Lebanese Shi'a throughout Lebanon would upset the country's sectarian fabric. They are worried that there is a concentration of Shi'a IDPs in more northerly cities and in the Shouf. "It's harder to control them in the cities than in their towns," said Nayla Moawad, adding that, "soon I'll have to wear a chador just to go down into Beirut."

Lebanon's Nightmare

16. (C) Displaying a common Lebanese paranoid streak, the group voiced its concern that the U.S. and Israel were now conspiring to keep Bashar Asad firmly ensconced in power in Syria. They described the fight with Hizballah as one upon which the future of the world turns, as a fight between two visions of the Middle East, that of democratic Lebanon versus autocratic Syria. They described Bashar as a "psychopath" who, if squeezed, may once again order the assassinations of distinguished anti-Syrian figures in Lebanon (most of the people present in the room would be targets). Despite reassurances to the contrary, one of the attendees even asked rhetorically, "What if, down the line, people decide that the best option is for the Syrians to come back?"

17. (U) This cable has been cleared by A/S Welch.
FELTMAN